

JA History

Prelude to Preserving Tule Lake: Laying the Foundation

By BARBARA TAKEI
Special to the Nichi Bei Weekly

At the July 2009 Tule Lake pilgrimage, close to 500 people celebrated the successful conclusion to years advocacy on behalf of the Tule Lake Segregation Center located in the Northern California town of Newell, near the Oregon border. The site was designated a National Monument by President George W. Bush in December 2008, and will go through an extensive National Park Service (NPS) planning process over the next several years.

The Tule Lake Segregation Center and the nearby Civilian Conservation Corps/Prisoners Of War camp nearby are a part of the WWII Valor in the Pacific National Monument that encompasses nine sites — five in Hawai'i, three in Alaska, and Tule Lake in California. National Monument status for Tule Lake, as the Segregation Center, gave important validation to the long-suppressed stories of protest that took place there.

"Tule Lake's recognition was long-overdue," Jim Fisher said recently. Fisher holds a Ph.D. in history and retired several years ago as a historian at the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), the state agency that owned the land where the jail and stockade and motor pool buildings are located. "We knew something would happen, but just didn't know when."

With the celebration over Monument status, it's hard to believe that

a few decades earlier, the Tule Lake site had few advocates and the historic buildings surrounding the iconic jail and stockade were threatened with destruction.

Since the structures in that area were on Caltrans land, Caltrans had the responsibility of evaluating their historic significance. In 1989, the agency completed a report declaring four of the six structures on 22.9 acres they owned, now part of the Tule Lake National Historic Landmark, as "not eligible for listing in the National Register." Listing on the National Register is an important designation that offers protection for historic structures.

The Caltrans environmental planner who wrote the 1989 report evidently did not see the buildings as historically significant and defined the historic area narrowly, says Fisher. "He failed to understand the situation in front of him."

That Caltrans report was sent to the State Office of Historic Preservation (SHPO) for filing, but, it disappeared into the bowels of the State's bureaucracy.

"Gene [Itogawa] deserves a lot of credit for burying that report," Fisher said. "No one could find it," Fisher remembered, laughing.

"When I found out what was in that report," said Itogawa, "I told Caltrans I refused to accept it." At the time, Itogawa was the staff historian at SHPO, the office where such reports would be filed to initiate

the process of approval and official documentation.

The standoff went on for over a decade until the late 1990s, when Fisher was asked to follow-up on the 1989 Caltrans report to evaluate the historic significance of the Newell maintenance station.

"At the time, I wondered why another report was needed since I thought the case was closed," remembered Fisher. He invited Itogawa to accompany him on the trip to Newell to evaluate the structures on the site.

"When I went up there, I was amazed at how much historical fabric was there," Fisher recalled. "I thought, wow, we've really got something here. There was an undeniably strong case for significance."

Fisher completed his evaluation report on the historic resources on the site in 2001, a report that led to major revision of the 1989 findings and helped forestall threatened destruction of the structures. In his report, Fisher found the Caltrans buildings "represent the largest single collection of standing structures in the United States associated with the mass internment of over 110,000 people during the 1940s."

Following advocacy by the Tule Lake Committee — guided by the expertise of professionals from the Cultural Resources Office of the NPS, State Parks and Recreation, State Historic Preservation Office, the National Trust for Historic Preservation and Caltrans — Caltrans moved to recognize



MONUMENTAL CENTERPIECE — The Tule Lake stockade jail will be the centerpiece of the Tule Lake unit of the National Monument. The stockade jail was described by the National Park Service as the "one of the most conspicuous symbols of the internment still remaining," in the 1999 publication "Confinement and Ethnicity." photo by Don Tateishi

the historic value of its Tule Lake properties and enable the preservation effort for the jail and stockade and motor pool area to move ahead. In 2003, Caltrans allotted \$299,000 to stabilize and protect the historic structures, and is in the process of transferring the property back to the Federal government.

Today, the area and the structures are designated as part of the Tule Lake Segregation Center National Historic

Landmark, the highest recognition the Department of the Interior grants to a historic site.

"Community advocacy makes a difference, but the process can be pretty discouraging," said Fisher. "It's to the credit of the [ad hoc Tule Lake Preservation Committee] that you stayed with it."

PRESERVING TULE LAKE'S UNIQUE HISTORY

With the support of a California Civil Liberties Public Education Program grant, the Tule Lake Committee is working with the Tule Lake unit of the National Monument to launch a new Website to provide information about visiting Tule Lake and understanding Tule Lake's unique history as a Segregation Center. Included among the materi-

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PRESERVING TULE LAKE'S UNIQUE HISTORY

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Included among the materials is an Army Western Defense Command list of individuals imprisoned in the Segregation Center between September 1943 and July 1944, a "virtual library" on euphemistic terminology, and a PBS "History Detectives" episode on Tule Lake artist George Tamura. Keep checking back as new content will be added to the site in future months.

The Website will help involve the public in the General Management Planning (GMP) process that will begin in 2010 and take three to four years to complete. In the GMP process, the NPS will work with other government agencies and the public to identify what themes are critical to interpreting the history, what resources and lands are critical to preserve and support the telling of the historic story, and what facilities and staffing structure will be necessary to operate the Monument. Notices will be posted on the Website about upcoming events and opportunities for the public to contribute and be involved in the planning process. For updates, check the Website at: www.nps.gov/tule/index.html.